Interview with James D. Rosenthal

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR JAMES D. ROSENTHAL

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is the 24th of May, 1996. This is an interview with James D. Rosenthal. You go by Jim, right? Let's start at the beginning. Tell me a bit about when and where you were born. And something about your family, your parents.

ROSENTHAL: I was born in San Francisco, in 1932. My mother is a native San Franciscan also, and I went to public school and then to Stanford University, graduating in 1953.

Q: What were you majoring in at Stanford?

ROSENTHAL: International relations.

Q: What pushed you towards international relations?

ROSENTHAL: Well, quite frankly, it was a Foreign Service recruiter, who came around and extolled the virtues of the Foreign Service. I caught on to that, and looked into it further, and actually took the written exam while I was still in school.

Q: Looking back on it, how good an international relations background did you get out of Stanford?

ROSENTHAL: Pretty good. It was not a full-fledged department when I was there. I think it is now. It was part of the political science department. But it was very well done, with a lot of good courses — pretty basic stuff.

Q: I think undergraduate is undergraduate.

ROSENTHAL: Right.

Q: Was there a focus on the Orient; beyond the Pacific?

ROSENTHAL: Not too much at that time. Although I had a professor, a former FSO, Claude Buss, who was one of my history professors. I took several courses from him, and he taught Asian History. So I happened to focus a little more on that. But the major itself didn't focus on that.

Q: When you graduated in 1953, what happened?

ROSENTHAL: I went for two years into the Marine Corps.

Q: I was going to say, the Korean War had just wound down.

ROSENTHAL: Right. I was stationed primarily in California. Well, Virginia first, Quantico, and then California, and then Hawaii. Then I took the oral exam. It must have been in mid-1955, while I was still in military service. Then I got into the Foreign Service in April, 1956.

Q: You took the oral exam. Do you remember any of the questions, or your impressions of the oral exam?

ROSENTHAL: Well, I remember that it was fairly brief, certainly, compared to what people go through today, and perhaps even subsequent to that. There were some fairly basic questions like “What were U.S. exports and imports,” and so on and so forth. I do recall

that I was in a great advantageous position. Whenever they asked a question I didn't know about, I just simply said that I'd been in military service, and I'd been out of touch for a while. It seemed to work very well. I also took the exam in uniform.

Q: You came in when?

ROSENTHAL: April 1, 1956.

Q: Could you give me a brief survey about where you served and when, so that we can frame these questions?

ROSENTHAL: Sure. After the A-100 course, I was assigned to the Property Management Branch, of the Office of General Services, in the Bureau of Administration.

Q: Oh, how exciting. And you were there from when to when?

ROSENTHAL: Yes it was. I must have been there about a year. Roughly 1956-57. And then sometime in that 1957 period, I was switched to be a staff assistant to Tom Estes, who was the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Operations.

Q: This would be from 1957-58.

ROSENTHAL: Then I took French language training here at FSI for several months. My first post abroad, in the fall of 1958, was in Trinidad — Port of Spain. I was there for two years, to 1960. From 1960-1961, I was here at FSI doing Vietnamese language and area training. From 1961-1965, I was at the Embassy in Saigon, as political officer. From 1965-1967, I was the State Department faculty member at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point. From 1967-1970, I was on the Vietnam Working Group, or the Vietnam Desk, here at the Department. From 1970-1972, I was at the Paris peace talks on Vietnam. Then from 1972-1974, I was DCM in the Central African Republic, during Bokassa's time. From 1974-1975, I was at the National War College, and then from 1975-77 I was Office Director for Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia Affairs — Indochina Affairs, basically. Then from

1977-79, I was DCM in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. From 1979 -82, I was DCM in Manila, the Philippines. In 1983-1986, I was Ambassador to the Republic of Guinea. From 1986-1990, I was Deputy Director for Management Operations here in the Department. And then I retired in March, 1990. A long checkered career.

Q: What we are going to do this time, and I hope we can pick it up at another time, but right now let's concentrate on Vietnam. You came in in 1956. Had Vietnam crossed your radar screen at all?

ROSENTHAL: No. In fact, in early 1960, when I was in Trinidad, looking toward another assignment, I requested India language and area training. I'm not quite sure why, but it seemed like the exotic thing at the time. I got back a very rapid reply saying I'd been assigned to Vietnamese language and area training. I'd never requested, never even knew about it.

Q: Maybe somebody misunderstood Indochina...

ROSENTHAL: Well, it changed my whole life, and was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Q: So you were taking Vietnamese from 1960-61 at FSI. What was your impression of the training, and the area studies — how one was looking at Vietnam at that particular period?

ROSENTHAL: Vietnam was beginning to heat up at that time. Obviously in 1960, we really began to put in more advisors there, in 1961 in particular, when Kennedy came in. So I think by the time I arrived at FSI, and then went through this training, I realized that this was going to be a major issue, or already was a major issue. The language training wasn't too good, quite frankly. There was very little material. There was one other FSO in my class, and the two of us had to make up our own lessons, and then ask the instructor to give it back to us in Vietnamese, and then we would discuss that for the whole day. It got a little better in the end, and then over the next few years the training

improved tremendously. But we happened to be in the time fairly early in the game, when there wasn't much in the way of materials or organization of the course. But we did learn Vietnamese, and both this other fellow and I went to Vietnam together, and used it. Although we both spoke French, we used Vietnamese. So it turned out to be OKAY, but it was a bit painful.

Q: I suppose you would have contact with the Desk, and some area studies. The 1960-61 period straddled the Eisenhower-Kennedy periods. Before you went out to Vietnam, what were the problems of Vietnam, what were you expecting — what did you think you would be doing?

ROSENTHAL: This was a time when the idea of wars of national liberation that the Communists were conducting had become rather well known. And of course, when Kennedy came in, he came in on, I think, a program, among others, of counter-insurgency. The whole counter-insurgency idea just began to be picked up at that time. There was also beginning to be a lot of concern about the increase in military activity on the part of the Communists in Vietnam. I think about at that time, people began to recognize that it was really coming from the North, that the North was really infiltrating cadres into the South. Up until that time, it seemed to be relatively limited to the South. There may have been some infiltration, but very minor. I think it was about that time when people began to realize that the North was entering this in a major way.

Q: What sort of a Desk did we have at that time? Who was looking after Vietnam?

ROSENTHAL: I don't recall.

Q: Was it much of an operation?

ROSENTHAL: I don't recall that it was a big operation. It was a standard Desk, probably 2-4 officers. I don't recall who was in charge.

Q: Were any American military at that time having courses in Vietnamese too?

ROSENTHAL: I don't know about elsewhere, but when we started out this Vietnamese language training in 1960, we had 3 Air Force enlisted men in with us. About half way through, I think we asked that we be separated from them, because they were not progressing at the same rate that we thought we were, and they were kind of holding us back. But that's the only military language training that I was aware of. Now there may have been others, but that was one.

Q: When you went out to Vietnam in 1961, you were there from 1961-65 the first time around. What were you being told to be concerned about, before you went out?

ROSENTHAL: Well, as I said, I think this idea of infiltration from the North, the escalation of the conflict by the North, the way this might play in the overall Soviet push for expansion in the world — the national war of liberation idea — all coming to a focus in Vietnam. And that was the major focus of my work the whole time there, basically, except for some internal South Vietnamese political work.

Q: So you got out there in 1961. Could you describe in 1961 what the Embassy was like: the atmosphere, the political-economic and social atmosphere of an officer going out there at that time?

ROSENTHAL: The Embassy political section was about 8 officers. There was also a large CIA station. There was a lot of concern about the stability of the Diem regime. That was a primary concern, because in December of 1960, there had been an attempted coup, which had failed. Then there was another one in 1961, when I was there, that failed. Then of course, in 1963 a coup ultimately succeeded, and threw him out. So that was a major concern. The other major concern was how well the South Vietnamese were doing in building and maintaining security in the countryside. And that eventually became the major focus of my activity.

Q: Who was the Ambassador when you got out there?

ROSENTHAL: Fritz Nolting. He was replaced by Henry Cabot Lodge later.

Q: What was your impression of Nolting while you were there?

ROSENTHAL: He was a very solid, very qualified man. I admired him very much. He was the first Ambassador I'd ever worked for, but a real gentleman, and a very intelligent and fair-minded man. I'm still an admirer of him.

Q: Who was the DCM at the time?

ROSENTHAL: I can't remember who it was when I got there, to tell you the truth. A little later it was William Trueheart.

Q: What was the impression of how Nolting viewed the situation in Vietnam?

ROSENTHAL: I think he viewed it fairly pragmatically. He was a very pragmatic man; he wasn't ideologically inclined or extreme one way or the other. I think it was pretty clear that he felt that our policy of supporting Diem was the right one. And he even, later on, in 1963, when Diem got into trouble, felt that we had no other alternative, but to continue to support Diem. There were those in the Embassy who didn't agree with that, who felt that the political situation under Diem was deteriorating, and that this would harm the war effort. At times I was tempted by that view, but I think I never came around to it. Because my impression, after traveling in the countryside and seeing how the war was going — and that was my major job — was that the war was not going that badly. There was political instability just in the capital. But outside the capitol, stability was relatively good. I thought that by early 1963, anyway, the South Vietnamese were actually doing fairly well in the countryside.

Q: Who was the head of the political section while you were there?

ROSENTHAL: It started out with Joe Mendenhall. Then a year or a year and a half later it became Mel Manfull.

Q: Were you immediately given this assignment of the countryside?

ROSENTHAL: That wasn't immediate. My first assignment was to do up a summary, or an overall survey, of the security situation generally in the country, which I did. And then I began to travel outside Saigon a bit. And then, the next year, in early 1962, three of us Vietnamese language officers formed into what we called a provincial reporting unit of the embassy political section. I was in charge of it. And we each took an area of the country, and traveled continually in that area. We came back and did reports on various areas. We were all Vietnamese language speakers, so we got out on a fairly broad basis.

Q: When you arrived in the political section, what were the relations with the CIA station, as far as how they looked at things. What were they reporting — did you get any feel for how the two of you — was it a little different?

ROSENTHAL: When I first got there, and for a year and a half afterward, I didn't feel any particular difference in the way we were reporting things. In fact, we were fairly close with a lot of the CIA officers. We even shared sources and contacts. It was a pretty close relationship.

Q: How about this idea of getting rid of Diem? When you initially got there...

ROSENTHAL: When I initially got there, I don't think that feeling was terribly strong. There were always a few people who thought our policy ought to be different, but my feeling was that that was not an overriding concern. It was more trying to make Diem perform and liberalize politically, because they had had this one coup, and then shortly afterward another coup attempt. Many people felt that he needed to broaden his government to prevent that from happening again. But the idea of getting rid of him — I don't think it really

became widespread, or maybe not even thought of at that time, early on. It was only when he had hit the Buddhist crisis of 1963 that positions changed.

Q: Was that really because of his actions, or was it because in Washington they didn't like the pictures of Buddhists burning themselves?

ROSENTHAL: It was probably both. But I think the perspective as seen from Washington was very important. The reporting of the press corps at that time was very important. What became increasingly divergent, to me, was the deterioration of the political situation in Saigon, which didn't affect the countryside or the war effort at all, as far as I could see when I went out there.

Q: At that time there were military areas in Vietnam. You say you had different areas to go to. Which one did you have?

ROSENTHAL: The Mekong Delta was my major beat. But I also covered northwest of Saigon, the old Iron Triangle area.

Q: So you had the southern area?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, but I also knew a fair amount about the northern area, because from November 1962 to about March-April, 1963, I acted as Consul in Hue, when John Helble was on an extended leave. So I covered his 6-8 provinces up in the North, at that time fairly extensively. So I knew those, and I knew the South. There was an area kind of in between that I wasn't so familiar with, but those two areas I knew.

Q: Can you talk a bit about how you got around and what you were seeing in the early periods while you were there?

ROSENTHAL: To go to the Mekong Delta, you could drive. In fact I did. I drove fairly frequently down to My Tho, down to Can Tho. You could also get military aircraft relatively easily. You could arrange it through the military attach#. There were also aircraft run by Air

America, run by the station. We would hop on those. But transportation really wasn't much of a problem. Even later it wasn't much of a problem. It became a little more military, and of course to go longer distances, into war zones, you had to have military aircraft. But you could drive a fair amount.

Q: Even in 1970, I drove from Saigon to My Tho. You would go out to the Delta or something — could you give me a typical trip, and what sort of things you were seeing, and how you worked?

ROSENTHAL: You would first go to the Province chief and meet him. You would ask him how things were going; talk over various areas — “This area, how secure is it, what are your problems,” etc. Then generally you would go down to the district level and talk to the district chiefs. They would generally take you on a tour of wherever you really wanted to go or wherever they thought you should go. You would look, at that time, at strategic hamlets. I looked at hundreds and hundreds of them. You would go to smaller villages or smaller towns and go in the marketplace and see what was doing in the market area, for the economic situation. You would talk to peasants or to soldiers, ask them how life was. Also to civil servants and village officials. So each trip would be to a province, and would take anywhere from 3-6 days. Then you would come back and spend a week or so writing a report on it, and then study up for the next one. I would also speak a lot to the American military.

Q: Was the American military pretty well distributed throughout there?

ROSENTHAL: There was already an extensive advisory system in place by that time.

Q: What was your impression of the officers assigned to that?

ROSENTHAL: Most of them were pretty good. The ones I knew in the Delta were rather good. And that's particularly true in those early years. For some reason, maybe a little

later, it became more of a ticket-punching type of thing. But in the early days, I don't think it was that way at all.

Q: They were probably getting more enthusiastic — this was something exotic and a way to get out and see a real war.

ROSENTHAL: Right. And the other thing is that there were no U.S. combat units in the country at that time. The main effort was an advisory effort. Therefore, the best officers wanted to go there. Once the combat troops arrived, then the best officers generally want to go into combat units for a lot of reasons, but I understand it. So in the early days, 1961-65, I thought the advisory group was pretty good, pretty talented.

Q: Did you run across John Paul Vann?

ROSENTHAL: I did.

Q: What was your impression of him?

ROSENTHAL: That's a good question. I did not share the great admiration that some people, particularly the press corps, shared for him. He was a very good man, a good officer. Very enthusiastic and patriotic, and effective in many ways. But I think he tended to look at his situation as the microcosm of the war. And I don't believe it was. In fact, I don't think the Mekong Delta, as a whole, was strategic. I think that there was a lot of activity going on there, but the level of activity that went on in the Mekong Delta could have gone on for twenty years.

Q: It essentially almost did. It never was the critical point.

ROSENTHAL: No, it was always the highlands and the northern part of South Vietnam. And when I knew him, John Paul Vann didn't know anything about that area at all, and looked upon ARVN performance and ARVN activities and South Vietnamese capabilities in the Delta as how the war was going. And because it was so easy to drive down to My

Tho, as you know, the correspondents would just get in their jeeps and go on down there, and talk to John Paul Vann to find out how The War was going. Well, the war wasn't wholly in the Mekong Delta, or even primarily in the Mekong Delta. But they would come back and report what John Vann told them about the war. And I didn't agree with that. I'd had enough experience elsewhere in the country to know that the Delta, although important, was not decisive. So I tended to take some of the things he said with a grain of salt. I didn't have a lot of contact with him. I met him several times and talked with him, but I didn't become an intimate of his, or anything like that. So I didn't share his perception, his view, of the war. And I think, actually, that he in some ways did a disservice. I don't think intentionally, but I think by focusing attention on his area, and perhaps diverting it from other, more important areas, he might have given a somewhat misleading impression of how the war was going. And certainly the correspondents gave a misleading impression of how the war was going.

Q: What was your impression of the newspaper corps at that time?

ROSENTHAL: Early on, I thought that the individuals were pretty good. I'm trying to think of the names. The first one I came in contact with for the New York Times was Homer Bigart. I didn't like him. I thought he was an opinionated, arrogant, old cuss, who I'm sure had great credentials as a combat correspondent in Korea and World War II. But he was very perverse. Everything that was going badly he would report — it seemed to me, anyway — and everything that was going well was just not reportable. There was also this idea in 1962, and it became a big thing with the media, that the U.S. was deceiving everybody by not admitting that more advisors were in there than were called for in the Geneva Accords, and so on and so forth. That's probably true. But it wasn't the major story, but they made it the major story. They focused a lot on that. I think that's really where some of the sour attitude toward the military and vice versa — between the military and the press — began. Or the government and the press began. And Bigart was one of those guys. And then he was followed by a fellow named Peter Grose, who was very good. I liked him. He was a younger guy, and I thought he was much more open-minded.

And then I think David Halberstam came next for the New York Times. And he was really opinionated. I didn't care for him too much, and I thought he became personally involved in the story. He and others like him. Even during the Buddhist crisis, when Diem really got into a lot of trouble, and of course the correspondents were reporting that and even magnifying it, taking pictures of Buddhists burning themselves in the street. I think they sort of took a personal stake in the story, which was that you had to get rid of Diem. And eventually that happened, without any idea of what was to follow. So I was not an admirer of the press corps. And I occasionally expressed that to some of the people, like Barry Zorthian, who was the PAO at the time, and others, like John Mecklin. I thought they were not doing a great job of covering the overall thing. And, it got worse later on. I think the press corps in Vietnam did a terrible job. I'm one of those dinosaurs that think that the press played a great role of doing us in in Vietnam.

Q: They seemed to get some very immature types. I remember I was Consul General there from 1969-70, having to go to the police station around the corner from the Embassy in order to get out some pressmen. There had been a riot, and they had pinned on the badge of the rioters, with black arm bands, and were helping throw stones at the police. And they were indignant as all hell when they got arrested. I wasn't very enthusiastic about trying to get them out.

ROSENTHAL: You should have let them stew awhile.

Q: Let's say I walked slowly.

ROSENTHAL: Good, I'm glad you did that, because most of them deserved it then. It was a terrible, terrible press corps.

Q: It reminded me a great deal of grad students who all of a sudden have the Holy Truth, and nobody else does.

ROSENTHAL: I think that was true from about early 1963 on. And then it got worse.

Q: Tell me about going up to the Hue area, when you would take over when John Helble wasn't there.

ROSENTHAL: Well, it was pretty quiet at that time. Hue was quiet. It later became the focal point of the Buddhist protests. But at that time it was very quiet. Hue was secure, quite secure. It was run by Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Can, who ran the northern provinces with an iron hand. I think strategic hamlets were a great success in that area, because Can really organized them. Not just physically, but politically. He had his agents everywhere, and they really organized those people. The strategic hamlet concept in the Delta was weaker because of the dispersed nature of the population. But in central Vietnam, the population did live in more concentrated groups, and you could organize them, defend them, and maintain political influence a lot easier. And he did. The proof of the pudding is that when Diem fell, of course Can himself fell. And the security in those areas deteriorated sharply, immediately, because that political influence, which Can provided, was no longer there.

Q: As you went around and sampled, were you getting any feel — I'm talking about events before early 1963 — were you able to talk to some of the Buddhist leaders?

ROSENTHAL: No, none.

Q: Why?

ROSENTHAL: They were not active, and they didn't seem to be a factor. They weren't attempting to contact anybody, and we didn't attempt to contact them. Particularly in Hue it wasn't the thing to do. But security was fairly good. I actually drove up to Quang Tri, and then over on Highway 9 up along the DMZ, Khe Sanh, and then to Laos, alone, without an escort at that time. I did it twice, I think. And then I could drive down the coast. I couldn't go all the way to Quang Ngai, because there was a stretch there that wasn't very good.

Q: This was the “Street Without Joy”?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, that area was still pretty bad. Quang Ngai, Quang Nam. But otherwise, I could get around very well, and talk to people reasonably well.

Q: Did you get any feel for the type of people the central government was sending out, first at the higher levels as the province leaders, and then maybe the district. Were these political appointees? Who were the people you were seeing?

ROSENTHAL: Well, in the Delta, my impression was that they were not necessarily political appointees. Now, that doesn't mean that they weren't politically connected, but they all were military officers. I thought they were pretty good, as a group. Particularly among the South Vietnamese, I thought they were as good an officer as you could find generally in South Vietnamese ranks, and fairly politically astute. They ran the thing reasonably well. Some were better than others. When you got up north, it was pretty clear that political connections were more important. That didn't mean they weren't capable. But they were clearly Can's men. Not Diem's men necessarily. They were, I think, stronger political leaders in the sense of organizing and maintaining control of the population.

Q: What were you getting from your contacts on the American side, and then on the Vietnamese side, about Can?

ROSENTHAL: Well, he was very reclusive. I never met him. In fact, I don't think that Helble did in several years there until the very end, when Can requested asylum. He was a very shadowy figure, but greatly feared. So I didn't have any personal impression of him at all. But there was no question that everything ran back to him in the Hue area, in the northern 6 or 8 provinces. He had a very tight control, and he was a very tough guy. He ran it in a pretty tough way. He didn't brook any opposition.

Q: If we were seeing problems up there, what was the standard? You would tell the Ambassador, the Ambassador would tell Diem, in hopes that he would pass it on? Or did we even operate in that manner?

ROSENTHAL: During the time I was there, the Consulate reported directly to Washington, as well as to the Embassy. And the Ambassador visited fairly frequently, or John, or in some cases, me, we'd go down to Saigon every month or two, and report. I think the problems we were reporting were more military and security related problems, rather than political problems, at least in my case. John was there longer, so he probably reported more political problems. But my major focus was on the security situation, which I thought was not too bad, with the exception of a few areas. So, I would report on areas that had problems, or why they had problems, and so on. But I never had any feeling that I was being short stopped or anything. My reports were going direct to the Department, as well as to the Embassy. Nobody ever said stop, or change it, or whatever.

Q: Cabot Lodge came in 1963. What was the impression when he arrived? Did he come with a different approach?

ROSENTHAL: There was no question about that. I think I was on home leave when Cabot Lodge actually arrived, if I'm not mistaken. Anyway, it was right around that time. I'd just done two years, and he arrived about that time. By that time, of course, the political situation had deteriorated in Saigon. We had Buddhist monks in the Embassy, who took asylum after the Pagoda raids, and all this. Lodge arrived just after that. It was clear that he carried no brief for Diem at all. But you know, those first couple of months, he didn't really confide in the Embassy very much. He brought his own staff with him, almost like confidential assistants. I think he confided in them, and maybe a couple of the senior officers of the Embassy. For a couple of months he played his cards pretty close to his chest, almost until the coup actually occurred. But at some point, and I don't remember exactly when it was, it was as if Lodge had suddenly decided that the political section was okay and then he kind of opened up to us rather well. So I had a mixed impression of

Lodge. I like him, actually. I thought he was a good man. He listened a lot, no matter what you had to say, once he understood you were on his side, a friend, or at least could be trusted.

Q: It sounds like almost the normal thing that goes on with political appointees as Ambassadors anywhere. They sort of come in, highly suspicious of the Foreign Service. You spend a long wasted bit of time, while they get to feel comfortable.

ROSENTHAL: I think that's exactly right. And of course this time there was also a considerable difference with the station. I mean, there were people in the station, including the station chief, who had close contact with Ngo Dinh Nhu, and felt that the policy that Lodge was perceived to be bringing with him was not the one that should be followed.

Q: What was the policy difference as you saw it from the Embassy?

ROSENTHAL: Well, when he first came in — I can't say that I saw that he was there to overthrow Diem. I honestly can't say that. Now, maybe others could say that, but I couldn't say that. I was a junior officer; I didn't know that. But that was fairly clear as you got toward that point, after the Pagoda raids, and after Lodge's taking in these Buddhist monks and some of the meetings he had with Diem. It became fairly clear that this was pretty much the path that everyone was going down. I must say, that I thought by that time, probably that was the right thing to do. As it turned out, I was wrong — I feel now that I was wrong. But at the time, I was on board.

Q: Maybe you were gone part of the time, but could you give a feel — it was the Buddhist movement that really changed things, wasn't it? How did that hit the Embassy, particularly the political section? What were we seeing behind this as it developed?

ROSENTHAL: It hit the political section fairly hard, in that we had been reporting that there was a lot of political discontent, as there was. There was no question about that. But we never thought it would come from the Buddhists, at least not in the political section. It just

was an unexpected quarter from which to have gotten political opposition. We were rather taken aback — I was, certainly, with the violence of the their protests, burning themselves, conducting demonstrations, and so on. So I think it was somewhat of a shock.

Q: Were we looking for who was behind this, or were we trying to see if this was a North Vietnamese plot?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, there was that feeling that it might be that. I don't think it was accepted as the reason, but I think we felt that the communists would certainly take advantage of it, as they did. I don't think there was a prevalent feeling — I don't recall, anyway — that it was a conscious North Vietnamese plot. I think it was more an opportunity for them, than a circumstance they created.

Q: Where was the station coming out? Was there a divergence?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, I think the station was probably more concerned and focused more on the undermining of the security situation that the Buddhists represented. Not just the political situation, but the security situation generally. I think they were slightly more inclined to see communists behind it, or at least encouraging it. So there might have been somewhat of a difference there, but I don't think it was that sharp. I don't recall it being that sharp. I think everybody agreed that this was, at least primarily, or at least in a significant way, a self-generated thing, generated by Diem's intransigence on certain issues, but also by Diem's favoring of the Catholics.

Q: What was the root cause, as you saw it, for this flare up?

ROSENTHAL: I think basically the Buddhists, after a long period — one could even say centuries — of political impotence and political inactivity, noninvolvement, began, like the rest of South Vietnamese society, to be caught up in politics. I think they also had a longstanding, particularly in Hue, grievance against the authorities, who were dominated by Catholics like Can, and his brother, Thuc, who was the Archbishop of Hue. They felt

that Catholics were favored, and they probably were favored. At the same time, a new generation of Buddhist leaders, Buddhist monks, had come into being. I think those Buddhist leaders, in addition to responding to these grievances, and then Diem's rather clumsy reaction against them — I think that they felt that they could be the cutting edge of a Buddhist renaissance. I think they really had great ambitions of leading a Buddhist Renaissance in that part of the world, and certainly in Vietnam. They were dead wrong, because they didn't have the power, unity, or ability to do it. But at that time, I think they felt that. As a matter of fact, we in the U.S. government felt that that was a possibility too. After Diem fell, we began to look into that, and to see if we could encourage it, to enlist the Buddhists against the communists.

Q: In the political section, while the turmoil was going on — this is before the overthrow of Diem — you had Buddhists coming in asking for asylum. Was the political section getting involved in who are the Buddhists, where are they coming from, and all?

ROSENTHAL: By that time everybody was involved in it. The political section, the station, everybody. When the three Buddhist monks, including Tri Quang, the major Buddhist leader, took refuge in the embassy, I was assigned to talk to him, debrief him, and see to his comforts. At the same time, a station officer also did the same thing. But we collaborated. We would talk to each other first, and decide who did what.

Q: What was your impression of Tri Quang? He was a leader whose face was everywhere in the States at the time.

ROSENTHAL: Well, he was a very charismatic leader, very forceful, very intelligent. I think his ambitions exceeded his grasp. As I say, he's really the ideological force behind the Buddhist uprising, and the Buddhist resurgence, such as it was. I think he felt so strongly about that, that he and his colleagues represented this resurgent Buddhism, that he carried it too far, and ultimately caused the downfall of the Buddhist political movement. He went too far, too fast, and tried to do too much. The movement was not ready for it.

Q: Were we trying to tell him to stop this immolation of monks?

ROSENTHAL: Before Diem fell?

Q: Yes.

ROSENTHAL: I don't recall that we did that. But I'm not sure that he would have had any way of doing it. He really was isolated in the Embassy. And while we gave him asylum, we were not about to let him operate a political movement outside of the Embassy. So we kept him isolated from his followers. So I'm not sure that we did that. Later, of course, we did it all the time. We tried to keep him from doing all kinds of things.

Q: Did you feel that he was approachable, or was he a man who was living in his own world?

ROSENTHAL: He was very approachable — to me and to a few others that he trusted. I became the contact for Tri Quang, and basically for the Buddhists. Not out of any skill or anything, but I just happened to be there. Over the following two years, after the fall of Diem, I saw Tri Quang maybe 150 times, maybe more. I could literally go, anytime of the day or night, right up to his door in the Pagoda, and knock on it, and he would let me in. And he also came to my house several times, particularly a couple of times during coup attempts. So I would say I had total contact with him. I'm not sure how much good it did, but he was very approachable, and he wanted to use us for his own purposes.

Q: Did he understand the United States?

ROSENTHAL: No, not very much.

Q: He did understand the power of the press, though.

ROSENTHAL: Absolutely.

Q: Because basically, this was his great strength, or one of them.

ROSENTHAL: And he had some younger monks who also understood it pretty well. He had some help. They were very good. But of course, the press was very receptive to this kind of thing too. It wasn't a difficult thing to enlist the American press in a burning bonze. It fact it became a Pulitzer Prize photo. I don't think it took a whole lot of skill to do that. But later, after the fall of Diem, we hoped that Tri Quang and his movement would rally to the noncommunist side and provide a foundation of support, or additional support. As it turned out, I think they simply weakened it, because they kept opposing every government that came in for one reason or another — even the ones that they suggested. Like Phan Huy Quat, for example, sometime in 1964. He suggested Quat, and said he was a good man. So Quat became Prime Minister, and within a couple of weeks, Tri Quang was against him. He was insatiable in terms of demands, and I think ultimately weakened the movement.

Q: Can you talk a bit of your experiences at the time leading up to the overthrow of Diem? Were you in Saigon most of this time?

ROSENTHAL: As a matter of fact, most of that time I was out of Saigon. I was traveling in the countryside. And that's why I say I tended to favor the view that the war in the countryside wasn't affected by the political turmoil in Saigon. Whereas there were others who were saying that the political turmoil in Saigon must be affecting the war. There is this famous trip that Marine General Krulak and Mendenhall took, and they came back with totally opposite views of what was going on. They were both absolutely right.

Q: This is when Kennedy said, “Are you sure you went to the same country?”

ROSENTHAL: Right. Well, they did go to the same country, but they saw totally different aspects of it.

Q: The military man was going out into the countryside, and Mendenhall was going to Saigon.

ROSENTHAL: And I had kind of the same experience, in my own little way, because I lived in Saigon, of course, and spent a fair amount of time there as well. But I wasn't at that time involved with the political opposition. There were other officers who did that. I stayed away from that, because I wanted to focus on the countryside. Then I got pulled into it when the Buddhists came to the Embassy. Then I began to get pulled into it, but only on the Buddhist side. I didn't really get to know the VNQDD or the Dai Viets, or people like that. At that time I was not involved with them. Later I became somewhat involved, but not at that time. So I was focused primarily on the countryside.

Q: In the countryside, were you finding, not political movement, but almost tribal movements — was there a lot of divisiveness out in the countryside, or were people thinking pretty much as South Vietnamese.

ROSENTHAL: That's a good question. I don't know the answer precisely. I never detected any great love for the north. Maybe they just didn't express. But I don't think there was much, and to this day I don't think there is much. The Delta, as you know, is made up of the Hoa Hao, and ethnic Cambodians, as well as ethnic Vietnamese of other stripes. So there were those movements, and there were those communities that certainly, while having no great loyalty to Saigon, certainly had no affinity for Hanoi. But the Delta again, as you know, is a rather mixed bag of people and communities. But I didn't detect any great separatist or hostile movements out there. They might not have had much enthusiasm for the government. The Hoa Hao, for example, I think had come back into the fold pretty much by that time.

Q: What would you call them?

ROSENTHAL: Sort of a religious sect, but even that was split into several different ways. The Caodai were a little farther north and to the west, again another religious sect. They had been crushed by Diem, of course, in the mid to late 1950s. By the time I got there, I thought they were pretty much at least neutral, if not on the government side. And the Hoa Hao certainly had no brief for the communists at all. In fact, the communists had a hard time in the Hoa Hao areas. They also had a hard time in the ethnic Cambodian area. The Caodai, I'm not so sure. I think they probably didn't do so badly there. So I didn't detect a lot of deep divisions in those areas. Not in the south, anyway. Now, in the northern part of South Vietnam, there were political divisions. Those places tended to be hotbeds of the VNQDD and Dai Viet in the French period and in the immediate post-Geneva period. They, of course, were deeply divided, not only between themselves, but against Can, against the Diem regime. So there was that political division.

Q: What about corruption during this time? Was this a major concern?

ROSENTHAL: Sure. I think it always has been in Vietnam. I got a little different view of corruption when I was talking to a district chief. I got to know him pretty well. I said, “You know, there are all kinds of rumors that you have phantom people on your payroll.” He said, “Yes, you're right. I get the money for my civil guard, who have been killed and are no longer on my rolls. I give it to the widows, because there are no benefits here. You want to call that corruption, okay, go ahead.” Now I don't know how true that was, but it gave me a little perspective that I hadn't really thought about before. In a system that doesn't provide certain things, maybe what we call corruption is the only way to get it. I'm not excusing a lot of corruption — there were a lot of corrupt types. But I didn't see lavish displays of it, during the Diem period anyway. I was in Hue for a while, and the officials there didn't live lavishly or ostentatiously. The only area in Hue where it was relatively ostentatious, was with the new cathedral and Catholics. They were ostentatious in their display of religious power. I think that was one of the forces behind the Buddhist uprising. But otherwise, I

don't recall having the impression of blatant corruption, like you see in many other parts of the world. Or as I saw later in Vietnam.

Q: The overthrow of Diem was in early November.

ROSENTHAL: November 1, 1963.

Q: Where were you when this happened?

ROSENTHAL: I was in Saigon.

Q: What did you do that day, more or less?

ROSENTHAL: That day, my wife had just had a baby a couple of days earlier. I was at the hospital around noon on November 1st. I heard shooting. My wife said, “What was that?” I said, “It must just be practice.” She said, “No, it sounds like more than practice to me.” And she was right. So I went back to the Embassy, and didn't see her for another couple of days. When I got back to the Embassy, they said that a coup had started. I went out into the streets to see what was doing. I happened to come across what I think were coup-side soldiers. They were firing at some tanks coming down the street, and so on. So I reported back to the Embassy about that all through the afternoon. Then I went back to the Embassy at night. They were still fighting at night. Early in the morning I went out again into the streets, and I actually went into the palace with the marines that took it. I was there when they were sort of looting it a little bit, taking Diem's possessions and laughing about it, and so on. But I actually went in with them. That clearly was the end for Diem. I didn't know anything about what happened to Diem. I was not involved in that part of it. Actually, a funny thing happened to me. Being part of this provincial-reporting unit, we were exempt from being duty officers, because we were out so often. But my name got put on the roster by mistake, about a week before. I said to the administrative officer, “I'm not supposed to be on it.” He said, “Rather than changing it, why don't you just take it this time, and we'll find somebody else later.” It just so happened that was the date of the coup. So I was duty

officer for Lodge that day. So I saw all of the telegrams that were going out, and I was there for about 48 hours.

Q: What was the reaction of Lodge and his support unit?

ROSENTHAL: Lodge was not an easy man to read. He didn't express his emotions very much, and he didn't confide in me — not very much, anyway. He seemed very businesslike and matter of fact, and he wasn't at all emotionally involved. There wasn't an emotional reaction. I was not privy to his supposed conversation with Diem at critical times. One thing I was privy to, however, was something that is an image I've had my whole life since then. There was a CIA guy, Lou Conein, who was a liaison officer with the coup leaders. He was going to bring the coup leaders to the embassy, and he did. And Lodge — I don't know if you know the old embassy, but it was a 7-story building and it had an elevator. Lodge sent me down to be there when they arrived, because I was the duty officer. I'll never forget the sight. This car pulled up to the Embassy and the cameras were grinding away. Conein hops out of the front seat, opens the back door, and salutes, and these guys come on out. As if he was delivering them to the Embassy, which he was. I just went up with them in the elevator, and Lodge greeted them. I wasn't in on the meeting. I was shocked. The whole image of this fellow Conein, who I knew and thought was really a good man, and that was his duty. But just the idea. If anything, it seems to me, Lodge should have waited and gone to see them. Here were the guys who had just carried out a coup, killed the chief of state, and then they walk up to the embassy, as if to say, “Hey, boss, we did a good job, didn't we?” It's an image that I still carry. It doesn't leave me. I don't know what it represents.

Q: What was the feeling in the political section when this happened. Relief? Shock? Concern?

ROSENTHAL: The feeling was relief. Because by that time, everybody was clearly feeling that we couldn't win with Diem. And I don't recall many people saying the opposite, or

saying anything by that time. It had just gotten to that point. I think we clearly felt it would be better for the war effort, and we were clearly wrong. The feeling was, I think, at least among the political section, that nothing could be worse than Diem. And as a matter of fact, everything was worse than Diem, as it turned out. And of course, when Diem was killed, that was a shock. It was a shock to Lodge, and it was a shock to everybody in the Embassy. I think we felt — I didn't know — but I think that Lodge felt he could get Diem out of the country, into exile. But that didn't happen.

Q: What was the feeling about the assassination of Diem and his brother? What was behind it?

ROSENTHAL: Nobody knew at the time. And to this day I think there are still a lot of questions about it. But there was this shock, from Lodge on down. I think there were some people — I'm not sure I would count myself among them — but there were a few people who said this is a terrible mistake. This really undoes a lot of what was accomplished by the overthrow. And that was correct, too. Because what it meant was all those people who were pro-Diem were immediately fearful. And their fears were somewhat justified. Some of their homes were looted that day, and some of the newspapers that had been published under Diem were broken into and vandalized, and so on. There were anti-Diem mobs in the street. So I think there was some justifiable concern. And when Diem and Nhu were obviously murdered — not just killed in action but murdered — that created a division that never did heal. Whereas if they had lived, it might not have been so deep. But that was a mistake, and there was shock at that, and real concern. But it just shows you, you can't control everything when you set these things in motion.

Q: Did you have the feeling that American presence was such that we could kind of control things and handle matters, rather than sitting back — we were pulling levers and doing things? Was this the general feeling in the Embassy?

ROSENTHAL: I'm not sure that was the general feeling in the Embassy. I think it was the feeling in Washington. I've talked to people since who were in Washington who felt that way. But I don't think those of us in Saigon felt that way that much. We obviously had a great influence, but I don't think we felt we were really running things. But I think Washington did.

Q: After the coup, from winter of 1963 on, what were you doing, and how did you and the political section deal with the situation?

ROSENTHAL: Well, first of all, I immediately went back out to the countryside, because my task was to see what was happening as a result of the coup. And I spent the next couple of months doing that, to see what deterioration there had been. And there was some. I think I was covering the Delta and northwest of Saigon at that time. Lyall Breckon was covering another area and Dave Engel was covering the highlands. I was covering the Delta. And there was deterioration there. But again, the Delta wasn't strategic. And then, of course, since I had become a great confidante of Tri Quang, whenever I was back in Saigon, my job was to keep in contact with him, and to see what he was up to, and to push our preferences, desires, and views on him.

Q: Tri Quang — how did he react to this? Did he feel that this was justified, that he was in charge?

ROSENTHAL: He felt that it was justified. Tri Quang was an interesting character, in that he was a basically irresponsible person. A good leader, but he would go up to the point of creating a situation and then step back from it. His immediate reaction was “well, I'm not involved in politics. We, the Buddhists, are not involved in politics.” Which was total baloney. So I think that was sort of his initial reaction. He was happy that it happened. But one could then go and say, what do you want to do now? And he would say, “Who, me? I'm not involved in politics.” And that was a theme that recurred for the next several years. Whenever you would get him to say he was for a particular government that came

in, he would get to a point and then his support would just fade away. Or he would just not get involved at all. He was very good at negative politics, but had no concept of positive politics. There were some who later said that it must be that he's being manipulated by the other side, just to keep things stirred up, in order to weaken the South Vietnamese. He did keep things stirred up, and it did weaken the South Vietnamese. I personally don't believe that it was at the instigation of the communists. I don't believe that he was in their thrall. But he had his own agenda. He had this basic irresponsible trait, where you couldn't count on him to support anything. You could always count on him to oppose a lot of people, but you couldn't count on him to support anybody. So I was constantly trying to get him to do this and that and the other thing. Of course, he was trying to get me to do things too, or the Embassy or the U.S. government to do things. I sometimes saw him two or three times a day during crisis times. So we had very good contact, but not necessarily very good agreement.

Q: When you went out to the field, did you find the South Vietnamese military commanders looking over their shoulder, with concern about what was happening?

ROSENTHAL: Absolutely. You could almost tell that the political impetus had gone out of every program there was, including the strategic hamlet program. Before Diem fell, it used to be that the district chief and the province chief were politically motivated to do well, just like any administration has its own imperatives from the demands of its people. There was none later on, because there was so much turmoil in Saigon, the people in the field didn't know who was in charge, who to report to, who to be loyal to, what program was the one they were supposed to carry out. And that was very evident for the next couple of years.

Q: Was the Viet Cong taking advantage of this situation?

ROSENTHAL: Yes. They took advantage of it to demolish a number of strategic hamlets in the Delta, where I was. But they really took advantage in the northern part of South Vietnam, where there the political impetus just collapsed completely, and there was

nobody giving any orders, and the Viet Cong did make major inroads, which they never gave up.

Q: When you went back to Saigon, did you find the political section preoccupied with trying to figure out which group of generals was doing what?

ROSENTHAL: Absolutely. That was the major preoccupation. And we all sort of tried to get that going. My specialty happened to be the Buddhists, but I also met with others. Everybody in the political section was devoted to that task, trying to patch together and keep together a South Vietnamese government that could conduct the war.

Q: Were there any promising signs?

ROSENTHAL: Not that first year, after Diem fell.

Q: In the political section, it sounds like a rather discouraged group of Foreign Service officers.

ROSENTHAL: No, I don't believe that's true. It was an unusual group of people. Many of us are still very close friends, with a kind of special bond.

Q: Who are some of them?

ROSENTHAL: Bob Miller, John Helble, Chuck Flowerree, Mel Levine, Mel Manfull, John Burke, Dick Smyser, Lyall Breckon, Dave Engel, John Negroponte, Walt Lundy. I'm probably forgetting some right now, but people like that. A very highly motivated and effective group. I thought it was the greatest group I ever worked with. And there wasn't this great demoralization or feeling that everything was going to hell in a hand basket. I think there was still the feeling that we would prevail. We all worked very hard. It was an excellent and unusually good group. I don't think that they were emotionally involved in the situation.

Q: It was more a professional challenge, rather than our side lost.

ROSENTHAL: None of the latter at all. There was a lot of debate as to whether we should have done this, that, or the other thing. And we all lived it very actively. But I never detected any defeatism or demoralization. Quite the contrary. Like you say, it seemed to be a challenge, and everybody responded.

Q: What were you getting from the officers in the political section who were getting out to the various South Vietnamese military leaders who were taking charge and then departing? It was called a revolving door, at that time.

ROSENTHAL: A lot of that was done by the station or the MAAG group. Because they were the ones that had contact with General Khanh, Ky, Thieu, or whoever. And the political counselor, Mel Manfull, had some contact as well. But I was not involved at all in that, and I don't recall any of my immediate colleagues who were. I think it was at a higher level, and focused more on the station and military, as they were military people.

Q: When you went out to the provinces and the districts, were the South Vietnamese province and district chiefs coming to you and saying, "Jim what's happening out there?"

ROSENTHAL: Sometimes they would ask. My impression was that we were always welcome. I never encountered anyone who was really negative about us being there, before or after Diem.

Q: Nobody was saying, "Boy, you guys did it."

ROSENTHAL: No, not to me, anyway. Yes, you're quite right, they would ask what was going on. And they were eager to receive us, to find out who was doing what to whom in Saigon, because they didn't know. That was kind of fun, because you became an informant as well as a reporter. It was often pretty good relationships.

Q: Did you sense a change during this post-Diem period, in both the press, which you have already alluded to, but also in Congress and American feeling toward Vietnam?

ROSENTHAL: I didn't feel anything about Congress and the American people. I didn't really have any concept of that at the time. The press, as I said, got worse. With every twist and turn of South Vietnamese politics, with the Buddhists, or the Catholics, or one faction or another coming up and trying to take power, or doing something. The press would just focus on all those things in a relatively negative way. They would pick up easy stories in Saigon. Then, of course, by the time American troops started to arrive, they would go out with American troops, and they would talk to the G.I. in the foxhole and say how's the war going? And every G.I. in every foxhole in every war has said, “This war is really screwed up.” And for him, it probably is. But you have to step back and say, “what's the perspective?” I thought the press did a terrible job on that. And it did the same thing with the politics in Saigon. They liked to focus on the crise du jour.

Q: It's not much different today in Washington.

ROSENTHAL: But it was very bad then, and it got worse, as a lot of these media adventurers started coming in.

Q: You left when in 1965?

ROSENTHAL: I left in July of 1965.

Q: You said your wife had a baby there. What was family life like?

ROSENTHAL: It was pretty good, actually. We had a nice house — small but nice. Most of the time we lived in a compound with four other officers and their families. We never felt any great danger. My wife had two children there. Her doctor was Diem's Minister of Health, who I think still practices here in Northern Virginia. He had his own clinic. It was a wonderful clinic. There was never any problem with that. We had a nice household staff

— things worked pretty well. My wife also looks back on it as one of our better tours. So living was not that difficult. There were occasional periods when you would have a coup attempt or something that gave you a little bit of concern. Then, of course, my family was evacuated in February of 1965. When we started bombing North Vietnam, we evacuated all the families. So she was evacuated in February, and I stayed on until July.

Q: Were you there then during the beginning of the buildup of the troops?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, just as we started building up.

Q: What was your feeling from the people you were dealing with in the Embassy about putting American troops in there?

ROSENTHAL: Well, I can't really recall that there was a strong feeling one way or the other. I think some of us felt some concern of what would American troops really do here — were we getting involved in something that would be difficult? But by that time the situation had deteriorated pretty badly. So I think there was this other feeling that well, we may need the troops to at least stabilize the situation. When they first came in, it was up in the north, and I think we all felt that that was the greatest threat. The rest of it didn't matter as much. If you had to have troops, that was the place to have them. So I don't recall any really serious misgivings about putting U.S. troops in there. Some concern, but no really serious misgivings. And no misgivings about bombing the north, that I can recall.

Q: Did the political section have much of a feel about what the Viet Cong were up to?

ROSENTHAL: I think so. We had pretty good information. We had a lot of intelligence from the station or stuff we would gather ourselves. As you know, intelligence wasn't that difficult to pick up there. It was not a terribly secretive movement. It wasn't open, but you could get the stuff if you wanted it. I think we had a pretty good idea of what they were up to. I don't think we had any illusions that Hanoi was not behind it. That was a big debate in Washington: the extent to which infiltration from the north really was going on, how

decisive it was, and so on. But I don't think there was much question from those of us on the ground. There was certainly no question in my mind, that this was from the north, fairly early in the game. But back in Washington we had a huge debate whether or not they were using North Vietnamese troops, whether or not they were coming in by sea, whether or not they were doing this or that. Well, they were doing all of the above.

Q: You left for a rather unusual assignment, and that was going to West Point, from 1965-1967. Sticking to the Vietnam side, in the first place, why were you assigned there? Was it connected to the Vietnam thing, or that you were a Marine officer?

ROSENTHAL: You know, I don't know. I never really did find out. I just knew I was asked if I'd like to go there, and I said yes. It possibly could have had something to do with the fact that I was in Vietnam, and maybe my military experience. They might have figured that I would be able to get along — I was the first State Department representative to West Point. They didn't have anybody before that.

Q: What were you doing?

ROSENTHAL: I was teaching political science, comparative politics and international relations.

Q: Did you find yourself while you were there getting involved in Vietnam?

ROSENTHAL: Oh yes, sure. I gave some lectures on Vietnam, primarily to the faculty in my department of social sciences. And I made up some of the course work that dealt with Indochina, talked a lot with members of the faculty. I didn't have as much contact with the cadets as one might think because they were so busy. But the contact with the faculty was really very valuable, many, many of whom went on to be generals and leaders in Vietnam.

Q: What was the feeling from the military that you were dealing with?

ROSENTHAL: I don't recall any serious doubts. I think the doubts were that we were not going in hard enough and fast enough. Doubts which I think proved to be correct.

Q: After your two years, you spent two years with the Vietnam Working Group.

ROSENTHAL: It was an interesting period, of course, because it included the Tet offensive. A lot of it was devoted to handling congressional correspondence, to going out and speaking on Vietnam. There was a period, of course, of considerable turbulence here on Vietnam. We were sort of one of the focal points of that. We spent a lot of time answering letters; I gave speeches at colleges and so on. We all did everything, but I happened to focus on the internal political situation in South Vietnam. At that time, it was early 1968, they had presidential elections. My particular responsibility was to follow those and analyze them and present a report on them, and inform people here about those elections. We put a fairly high stake on those elections, as a sign of budding democracy in South Vietnam, and legitimization of Thieu.

Q: What was the feeling about Thieu at that time?

ROSENTHAL: You mean here?

Q: I mean, from the bowels of the working group.

ROSENTHAL: I don't think anyone had any great illusions that he was the ultimate leader. But I don't think there was all that much negative about him. By that time, he had begun to prevail over Ky. The Thieu-Ky combination had worn a little thin, although the two of them had succeeded in restoring stability to South Vietnam. They crushed the Buddhist movement, and they restored some kind of stability. Then Thieu became preeminent around that time, when the election took place. Of the two, he was considered more reasonable and more moderate, and less flamboyant. So, given the choices, there was

probably a fair amount of support for him. After the Tet offensive, that's when things started to change.

Q: Before we get to the Tet offensive, you say you went out and gave speeches. This must have been practically combat duty.

ROSENTHAL: Yes, it was. It was very difficult.

Q: This is tape 2 side 1 with Jim ROSENTHAL on Vietnam.

ROSENTHAL: I went all over the country making speeches, justifying our policy in Vietnam. It was difficult, although it wasn't perhaps as difficult as some might think, in the sense that we didn't go to the most extreme places and try to talk to somebody who wouldn't even listen. We were a bit choosy. We would pick audiences we thought we would at least have a chance of getting across to. I personally found college groups more difficult to talk to than, say, high school groups, Rotary clubs, Kiwanis clubs, and things like that. The latter — high school students and community organizations — were much more open-minded. College students were impossible, because the only ones who showed up were the radicals intent on beating you over the head, and using you as a doormat. So we tended not to go to so many of those after a while, when they proved to be ineffective. We would brief members of Congress or congressional staff. We'd answer specific inquiries that their constituents might have or they might have. We prepared position papers for hearings. And we had almost constant hearings on Vietnam. But the atmosphere in the country obviously was not good, and we weren't all that welcome everywhere we went, particularly on college campuses. But elsewhere, we were more welcome. I guess when I look at it in retrospect, I realize that we probably should have done more with those who were at least open minded, and forgot the idiots who were close minded on it. That was actually LBJ's problem too. He kept trying to co-opt the opposition. But there's a point where you simply can't co-opt anymore, and they co-opt you. I think we made a mistake, both at the highest level, and all up and down, in trying to explain and win over

the opposition. There was some opposition that would just simply never go away. I think we should have said, “You're wrong, you're absolutely wrong. We're opposed to what you say, and we're not going to try to convince you,” and go make a stronger effort with those who might have supported the effort.

Q: How did the Tet offensive in February of 1968 impact the working group?

ROSENTHAL: My own reaction was that this wasn't as bad as it seemed, as it was being reported by the press. Of course, we had reports coming in: military and other embassy and CIA reports. It just didn't seem as bad on the ground as the press was reporting it, and as the Administration felt that it was. What seemed to hit the Department and EAP harder was the overthrow of Sihanouk.

Q: This was in the Spring of 1970. What was the reaction to that? This was also timed or shortly thereafter when we went into our incursion into Cambodia, which caused all sorts of turmoil — the Kent State shootings. What was the perspective of the Vietnam working group?

ROSENTHAL: The Vietnam working group was not directly involved in it, because there was a Laos, Cambodia desk as well. But I remember all of us, particularly Assistant Secretary Marshall Green, was very concerned that we were being seen as having overthrown Sihanouk, the last bastion of neutralism and neutral respectability in Cambodia, which wasn't true, but could be perceived as that. I know there was real concern that that was a turning point that would be difficult to deal with. The incursion into Cambodia — I don't recall if it came after or before that, to tell you the truth. But we had massive demonstrations. In fact, those of us on the working group went out among the demonstrators. I gave three or four different talks to groups of demonstrators. Not in the streets per se, but we would get 50 or 100 of them in, a group, say, from Cornell, and get them into the Department of Commerce downtown and talk to them. They didn't believe it, but...

Q: Then you got tapped for the Paris peace talks. Nixon was in, we were starting Vietnamization...

ROSENTHAL: It was early 1969, of course, that Nixon came in. I went to the peace talks on TDY for several weeks, around the time of the shape of the table debate, and all that sort of thing.

Q: This is in Paris when they decided how the people would sit: the Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, and ourselves.

ROSENTHAL: So I was actually there after the U.S. Presidential election and on into January of 1969. I was still on the working group but I happened to be there. That was interesting, because Harriman was clearly very disrespectful of the South Vietnamese. He was disdainful of them, and made no bones about it. Lodge, on the other hand, had a better appreciation and a better opinion of them. Harriman just saw them as standing in the way of, in effect, getting out and getting it over with. Lodge saw them as an ally we had to deal with and had to support. I remember Harriman had almost nothing to do with the head of the South Vietnamese delegation. Lodge, as I recall — I think the first thing he did when he came into Paris was to go over and call on the South Vietnamese Ambassador. I remember that was a very good lesson. That was very symbolic, particularly in contrast with Harriman's really poor treatment of the South Vietnamese. And then I left after that.

Q: At that time, did you get the feeling that Harriman was just there to clean up the mess and to hell with it.

ROSENTHAL: I really believe that Harriman just wanted to get out, and felt it wasn't worth it; that the South Vietnamese weren't worth it, and that they were simply in the way. We should turn it over, in effect, maybe with some kind of a fig leaf, but basically it was a defeatist attitude. And of course Lodge came in, and Nixon came in, quite differently. I'm sure Harriman was absolutely devastated by Nixon's elections. He was a bitter opponent

of Nixon, as were all good Democrats at that time. The idea that this nemesis should be elected and then take over his brief, I think really embittered him. It was quite a contrast. One other thing that happened: Up until the time that Lodge came in, under Harriman, we had not raised the POW issue in any significant way with the North Vietnamese, thinking that if we did that we would only get them treated worse. Lodge came in with the idea saying, “No, the only way you are going to get better treatment is to hammer on it.” And we began every week to hit the POW issue. And then in fact we did get better treatment for them.

Q: You ended up at the Paris peace talks from when in the 1970s to when?

ROSENTHAL: From mid-1970 to mid-1972.

Q: What was happening during this period? What was your role?

ROSENTHAL: The role of the formal delegation was basically to conduct the public side of the negotiations. There were these weekly meetings in the Majestic Hotel. No negotiations went on in those meetings. We met every week; all four sides spoke. The transcripts were released to the press later and all would have a press conference later. Although the press wasn't in on the meeting, the whole thing was open. And so this was the public side of it, the propaganda side of it, and, in effect, the facade of it. Because the real negotiations went on secretly behind the backs of everybody, including me. I didn't know until much later that they were going on, with Kissinger and a few key people. I'm sure the head of the delegation knew what was going on. But those of us in the delegation were totally surprised when Kissinger made public his negotiations with the North Vietnamese. Totally. We had no idea.

Q: When did that word come out?

ROSENTHAL: It must have been in 1972.

Q: What did you do with this exercise in propaganda?

ROSENTHAL: You would prepare statements, you would prepare rebuttals, you would prepare additional statements. You might have a theme, like the POW issue on mail, for example. So we would all meet and decide what we were going to talk about that next meeting, and then we would coordinate with the South Vietnamese, and they would do part of it as well. Then we would try to figure out what the other side was going to say. In the meantime, you would answer a lot of questions from the press, official and unofficial visitors.

Q: What would you do with them?

ROSENTHAL: Like George McGovern, who would come and meet the other side. I remember that one particularly, because he was running for president at the time. He came out and met the other side, without us, of course. I was assigned to find out what went on. When they came back his guy told me nothing went on — nothing new. That was a Saturday night. I remember it very well. Sunday morning, he had a breakfast with the press, and stated the North Vietnamese had told him something new, something very important and promising and it was a big story. Well, it's true that what McGovern described would have been a big concession on the part of the North Vietnamese. So the next Thursday — the meetings were on Thursdays — we asked them about this. “You reportedly said to George McGovern so and so, and so and so...is that true?” And they said, “No, absolutely not.” It was really an interesting case study of somebody trying to pull something off privately for political gain, when it wasn't true. Or maybe it was just a misinterpretation. The least they could have done was say, “Hey, they told us this.” We could have saved them an embarrassment, by saying no, we don't believe that's what they said. Or, they couldn't have said that, or if they did, it would be a major concession, and so on. But the McGovern group just stonewalled us, and went public with it. There were a lot

of groups like that. There were POW families who came. There were all kinds of Senators and Congressmen — peace groups of all kinds.

Q: Did you feel that a lot of these groups were basically trying to undercut you?

ROSENTHAL: I think some of them were. Most of them no — most of them were pretty good. Almost every one that did visit the other side's delegation would come back because they would want to know, “What does this mean?” And we wanted to know what went on, too. In no case, that I can recall, while I was there, anyway, did any of the groups ever come back with anything of real importance in terms of a negotiating breakthrough. They didn't know, and I didn't know that there were secret talks going on. So, clearly, the Vietnamese would play these groups. They would try to lead them down the garden path a little bit, to put more pressure on us. But as far as I can tell, there was never any private diplomacy conducted through any of those groups. It was just propaganda. Many of them were being used by Hanoi.

Q: From what you are saying, it sounds like a pretty static situation. And to do it for two years — this must have been a little bit wearying on the soul.

ROSENTHAL: Very. In fact, it was so wearying, I willingly went to the Central African Republic as DCM. Seriously, I was just goddamned tired of Vietnam. I'd spent a lot of time on Vietnam anyway, and I wasn't in on the secret talks, which were not secret by that time. So I figured, what the hell.

Q: Did you sort of have the feeling, as almost writing off Vietnam as a career place by this time?

ROSENTHAL: No, I didn't have that feeling. I just was tired of having spent a lot of time on it. Also, from a career standpoint, being DCM was my next move. So I went off to Bangui for two years.

Q: Why don't we stop at this point. I hope we can work this out. Let me stop here.

End of interview